

~~By John F. [unclear]~~

The Parish of St. Mary's of the Assumption had its formal beginnings in June, 1852, when a congregation gathered at the Brookline Lyceum to attend the first ^{public} recorded Mass. The parish had been created under the direction of John B. Fitzpatrick, the third Bishop of Boston, who named the Reverend Michael O'Beirne as first pastor. The Lyceum, located on the Boston-Worcester road, had formerly served as an inn under a name which was not particularly suggestive of the spiritual activities to come, that is, The Punch Bowl Tavern.

At the time the Catholics organized their first church, Brookline was a community of less than 2,000 souls. There were then in existence four churches of other faiths serving the Town, the ancient First Parish, the Orthodox Congregational Church on Harvard Street, the Baptist Church and St. Paul's Episcopal Church.

We may assume from the foregoing that although the population generally was mildly divided by different shades of Protestant belief, nevertheless its complexion was fairly monolithic, being mostly composed of people whose ancestors had lived in or near the village on the Muddy River for decades.

The new Catholic congregation were of a different stock. They were for the most part recently arrived from Ireland. There had long been people of Irish blood in Massachusetts Bay, as a substantial flow of Irish immigrants had continued from earliest colonial times, but they had been quickly assimilated into the general population, adopting its beliefs and point of view, so that little was left to identify them but their names and a vague memory of their traditions. As early as 1737 twenty-six gentlemen, natives of Ireland or of Irish extraction, had assembled in Boston on St. Patrick's Day to organize the Charitable Irish Society with the professed purpose of preserving their Irish nationality. Among those who fought the British at Bunker Hill were many with

unmistakeably Irish names.

Among the more famous persons of this sort were the family of Sullivans, which included governors, legislators, etc. A branch of this family apparently lived in Brookline in the last half of the 18th century, as it appears that in 1795 the Town purchased land from a Richard Sullivan, Esq., for the benefit of the First Parish.

But the people who formed St. Mary's were mostly of immigrant stock. Over a million and a half people had come to this country from Ireland in the three decades between 1820 and 1850 and the dreadful potato famine of 1845 accelerated this flow. Of course, a substantial portion of these immigrants landed in Boston, many settling in the city. At first they populated South Boston. Without money or education they could support themselves only at manual labor, and gradually, as some of them bettered their lot, they moved from the overcrowded and squalid conditions of their first homes out into the Village area of Brookline.

Looking back at that period over the distance of 100 years, we may wonder what the feeling of Brookline's native inhabitants was when these people were of sufficient number to organize a Catholic church in their town. I have not found any contemporary comments bearing on this subject. However, it occurred to me that it might interest my listeners to review some of the actions and reactions of earlier citizens of the mother metropolis of Boston upon the arrival or threat of arrival of Catholics in their midst.

The first Catholic resident in Boston who achieved any notoriety was Ann Glover, known as Goody Glover, whom Cotton Mather referred to as "a scandalous old Irish woman, very poor, a Roman Catholic, and obstinate in idolatry". Largely through his efforts she was later tried and hung as a witch in the mania

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of 1688. Exiled Acadians were denied the service of a priest by Governor Hutchinson in 1772 because, in his view, "the people would upon no terms have consented to the public exercise of religious worship by Roman Catholic priests."

Happily, under the benign influence of the Revolution and the acceptance of the Federal Constitution by which our now traditional liberties were promulgated, a new concept of religious tolerance pervaded the atmosphere of Boston. In 1799 under Jean-Louis de Cheverus, soon to become the first Bishop of Boston, a new Catholic church was built in that town. From its own congregation was collected \$16,000 but more surprising, almost the entire balance of its cost, that is, the sum of \$11,000, was contributed by leading Protestant families, headed by the President of the United States, John Adams. The plans for the building were supplied without charge by the famous architect, Charles Bulfinch.

The labors of Cheverus as priest and bishop covered a period of twenty-seven years, ending in 1823. His parish embraced almost all New England and he was known to travel on foot as far as Hingham to minister to a member of his flock. Such a vigorous demonstration of missionary zeal in the middle of the 20th century, when walking is a forgotten form of locomotion, would doubtless astonish clergymen of every faith and sect. At all events, Cheverus' devotion to his duties did not pass unnoticed among his contemporaries. Dr. Channing, the eminent Unitarian minister of that time, said of him, "Who among our religious teachers would solicit a comparison between himself and the devoted Cheverus? How can we shut our hearts against this proof of the Catholic religion to form good and great men? It is time that greater justice were done to this ancient and widespread community."

From all this it must be inferred that virtue is not only its own reward but, if it shines brightly enough, its light will be readily observed.

The manner in which Cheverus was received in Boston illustrates magnificently the intellectual impact that one man of good will may have upon other men of like mind.

Returning again to St. Mary's, its congregation continued to assemble at the Lyceum for over a year. A building of its own was acquired on Andem Place where the first service was held on Christmas Day, 1853, and in the next year Father O'Beirne was succeeded by the Reverend John M. Finotti, who served as pastor until 1872. During the first years of St. Mary's existence, we must observe that the pendulum of tolerance had swung again in the wrong direction. The Eighteen-Fifties were the period of the Know-Nothings. In July of 1854 the churches at Dorchester, at Bath and Manchester, N. H., were destroyed by mobs. A special committee, appointed by the General Court of Massachusetts, forced their way into several convents to investigate them. In March, 1859, a Catholic boy was whipped for refusing to read the Protestant Bible and recite Protestant Prayers in a Boston Public School.

I have discovered nothing to indicate such a reaction in Brookline. The nearest approach is a faint hint that there may for a time have been some segregation of the newcomers in the Public Schools. The report of the School Committee for the year 1849, reporting on the so-called intermediate school, contains the following statement:

"The rapid increase of this school during the winter term by the addition of a considerable number of large boys, mostly foreigners and often ignorant of even the first rudiments of education, has for some years operated as a serious drawback upon the progress of the whole school. Soon after the commencement of the present term the evil resulting from this source demanded an immediate remedy. We therefore divided the school, placing the larger and more backward pupils by themselves in a separate room".

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If any discrimination whatever did exist in our schools, we can be sure it did not persist for long. The records disclose that by 1890 there were two Catholics on the School Committee and one of these was the Reverend L. J. Morris, the fourth pastor of St. Mary's. (Father ~~Minotti~~^X had been followed by Father P. J. Lamb who served for only about one year. Father Morris succeeded Lamb in 1873 and guided the congregation for twenty-seven years, until 1900.) The other Catholic member of the School Committee at that time was Michael Driscoll for whom one of our schools is named. With such representation as this, it can be assumed that the administration of the public schools was in all respects satisfactory to the Catholic population. This was before the time when St. Mary's organized its own schools. A school fund had been accumulated for many years toward the day when the parish could send its children to a school of its own and ultimately this goal was realized under the pastorate of Monsignor Michael T. McManus with the opening of the primary school in 1907. The parish high school came a few years later.

To many the withdrawal, at least in part, of the Catholic children from the Public Schools will seem regrettable. The separate Catholic school system has been recently referred to as divisive and contrary to the widely accepted views on this subject in the present century. However, this determination among the Catholics of Brookline, and elsewhere, to make available to their children an education under Church auspices can be more accurately described as a return to the American tradition than a departure from it. With my listeners' indulgence, I should like to dwell for a moment on this point.

The first settlers of this Commonwealth, the Puritans, were beyond doubt people who took religion most seriously. As such, they organized here a community which was based on the concept that a man's civil and religious life were one. Their municipal government was the town and each town was also a parish. The

moderator of the town was the moderator of the parish. The town meeting was the parish meeting. That meeting hired not only the master for its school but also the minister for its church, and appropriated money for the support of both. The money appropriated for these purposes was raised by taxing all the inhabitants. And what has been forgotten by many is the fact that this state of affairs did not end in 1789 with the adoption of the Federal Constitution and the Bill of Rights but continued in this state and elsewhere for years afterward. To capture the flavor of this tradition, I would like to quote from the Third Article of our State Constitution which reads as follows:

"As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion and morality; and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community, but by the institution of the public worship of God, and of public instructions in piety, religion and morality: Therefore to promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality, in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.

"And the people of this commonwealth have also a right to, and do, invest their legislature with authority to enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid, at stated times and seasons, if there be any on whose instructions they can conscientiously and conveniently attend.

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"Provided, notwithstanding, that the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, shall, at all times, have the exclusive right of electing their public teachers, and of contracting with them for their support and maintenance.

"And all moneys paid by the subject to the support of public worship, and of the public teachers aforesaid, shall, if he require it, be uniformly applied to the support of the public teacher or teachers of his own religious sect or denomination, provided there be any on whose instructions he attends; otherwise it may be paid towards the support of the teacher or teachers of the parish or precinct in which the said moneys are raised.

"And every denomination of Christians, demeaning themselves peaceably, and as good subjects of the commonwealth, shall be equally under the protection of the law: and no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law."

The above article remained in force and effect until 1833.

It was under the enabling legislation of this article that a citizen living within the limits of a town was required to pay a tax toward the support of the minister of the town. Some freedom of choice, however, was left to the individual, for if his conscience required him to attend the instructions of a minister of another denomination than that established in the town where he lived, then he might exempt himself from the payment of such tax provided he filed with the Town Clerk a certificate that he attended a different parish.

An interesting decision arising under these laws is the case of Amesbury Nail Factory Company v. Weed (1820) found in volume 17 Massachusetts Reports at

page 52. In that case the plaintiff, a manufacturing corporation, declined to pay taxes on real estate which it owned in the East Parish in the town of Amesbury, which taxes were assessed "for the defraying of parochial charges arising in that parish." The corporation sought to avoid the payment of such tax on the basis that the corporation had no opportunity of voting on the expenses to be incurred for the support of public teachers, could not vote for their election and removal and could not possibly derive any benefit from the instructions of the teachers. It was argued on behalf of the plaintiff corporation that "the observation of Lord Coke that corporations had no souls, applies with great force in the case; since the whole purpose of creating parishes and authorizing them to raise money is merely pro salute animae."

It was held by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts that the tax was properly levied, the Court rendering the following opinion:

"The objection of the plaintiffs is, that they can derive no benefit from the expenditure of parochial taxes, and that they ought not therefore to be compelled to contribute to them. It was justly said in the argument, that the same objection lies for non-residents, and would as well apply in both cases to the taxes raised by towns for the support of schools, as to those raised for the support of public religious instruction. But the truth is, that the interests of corporations are promoted by both, equally with those of individuals. Property is made more secure, both by the education of children, and the religious and moral instruction of adults. In this additional security, every owner of an estate receives a compensation for the moneys paid by him towards the support of those institutions. The estate of the plaintiffs, lying in the East Parish of Amesbury, was therefore liable, in equity and

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good conscience, as well as by law, to be assessed for its due proportion of the regular expenses of the parish."

The point I am trying to underscore and which I trust will not be thought to be out of place in a paper which purports to be an outline of the history of St. Mary's parish, is this: that the early inhabitants of this Town, as elsewhere in Massachusetts, clearly held the view that religion was not merely a matter of Sunday observance but was a vital part of the everyday life of the community and something with which the municipality itself should be concerned, and further, that such a view did not prevent them from developing in a splendid manner the basic democratic principles by which we are governed to this day.

Of course, it was inevitable, with the arrival of more and more people of different creeds, that the public schools should and did become completely neutral in the matter of religion, and at the same time it is understandable that many of the Catholics, remembering the sacrifices of their forbears in remaining firm in their ancient faith, should prefer to educate their children in a more religious atmosphere. In doing so, I should like to suggest, the Catholics do not put themselves outside the American tradition but remain a part of it. Holding these views on the importance of religious instruction may make them old-fashioned but not un-American.

Pick up here
In the hundred years since its first congregation met at the Lyceum, St. Mary's Parish has moved twice, first to Andem Place, already referred to, and second to its present church building on Harvard Street, which was begun in 1880 and dedicated six years later. The Parish has seen its members grow from a few hundred to more than 8,000 and in the process has had several new parishes carved out of its original territorial limits.

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I would like to conclude by saying that in giving consideration to these centennial anniversaries, which always carry one back to a time beyond any living memory and into the realm of speculation, at least to some degree, there is a natural temptation to face about in the opposite direction and strain to see what shape the future will take in 2052.

For my part, I cannot divine the future even to November 4 of the current year, but if I could see 100 years ahead I would hope to perceive that the people of St. Mary's and their neighbors, and the counterparts of both all over the country, will have grown so accustomed to one another that they can emulate the peoples of Switzerland who take for granted their natural differences of race, creed and even of language, knowing that it is their common devotion to democratic ideals and practices which has enabled them to live together in freedom and peace for half a millenium.

John F. DePue

